

### Introduction

In 1992, Billie Alban and Barbara Bunker edited a special issue of the *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science* dedicated to exploring what they saw as an emergent social technology – Large Group Interventions. They wrote the book *'Large Group Interventions – Engaging the Whole System in Rapid Change'* in 1996. In it they present a comprehensive overview of the twelve main methods that had emerged at that stage. They began many of the conversations about this new field of change practice in that book and at many OD Conferences and Workshops around the world.

In 1999 'The Change Handbook' edited by Peggy Holman and Tom Devane supplemented their work. Using contributions from the developers they described 18 methods. It is a field that is growing in concept and practice

### So why do people have Interactive Large Group Conferences?

The underpinning purpose for getting the 'whole system in the room' is to engage more people, more effectively, in sharing data about the organisational environment, planning for a better future and deciding how to make it happen.

In order to survive and compete in today's market, organisations need to

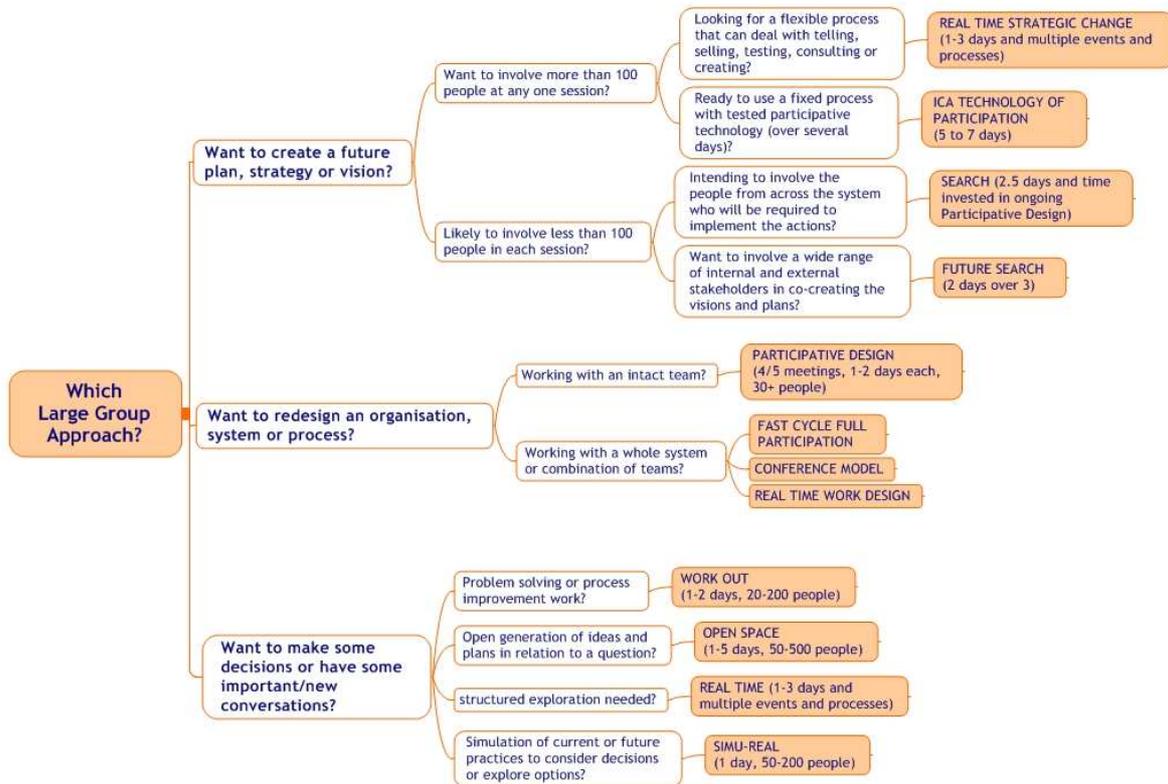
- Increase organisational collaboration
- Pool dispersed resources and ideas
- Break down barriers
- Leverage creativity, and
- Foster productive employee interaction.

Organisations need to engage large and diverse groups of people in interactive, meaningful dialogue. Large Group working has the potential to accelerate change and embody new ways of working, leaving people highly engaged and energised. Our belief, borne out by experience, is that anything can be done with large numbers of people - it is just a question of designing how!

### What is large?

Traditionally, to have a meaningful dialogue, you need to be able to 'see the white's of people's eyes' and so up to 20 would be considered an average size group. But when you want to engage 3,000 of your staff, it's impossible to have small meetings with 20 people at a time.

At VISTA we consider large to be when it goes into the hundreds. Meetings of 50 are ordinary – but then we've been working with large groups for a long time!



### How are they used?

For large group interventions to be effective they must address issues that affect a number of people across all levels and functions within an organisation. For example:

- Setting a strategic goal for the organisation
- Helping new groups come together to design new ways of working i.e. mergers, new partnerships
- Deciding where the organisation needs to be at some point in the future and how to get there
- Re-design of new work processes

### Facilitating a Large Group event

Many experienced trainers and OD professionals will observe a large group event or read the book and think to themselves, "This is easy, I can do this without any further help". You are so wrong!

Large group events are complex in their design, are based on theory and principles and have had many years honing by the originators of the approaches.

Our advice before you tackle this work is to be trained by a person that knows the approach inside out.

### What working with Large Groups isn't!

When working with large numbers of people it very quickly becomes apparent if there is a misfit in the approach being used and the desired outcomes.

They are not the chance to bring people together and convince them of the right way forward! Nor is it a way of simply 'indoctrinating' people into your way of thinking or giving them the illusion of decision making.

This way of working offers a real opportunity to use the experience and knowledge that your staff has and for your staff to see the issues, problems and opportunities that the business or community is faced with and together plan a way forward.



## The first steps

### 1. Working with the leaders

Critical to the success of large group events is the support and backing of a sponsor – someone from the senior team. And an aligned leadership team is essential.

### 2. The Design / Planning Team

A key first step in planning your large group (whole system) work is bringing together your 'design' or 'planning' team. Ideally the design/planning team should constitute a comprehensive 'microcosm' of the system in terms of level/grade/function, age and gender, length of service etc. In particular it is worth paying attention to ensure that some cynics and leaders of informal opinion are included in the team. The more you are worried about the difficulties of the team working together, the more likely you are to have a comprehensive mix.

The team can be as small as six to ten people and as large as thirty. It can be harder to reach consensus with the larger team although the risk with a smaller team is that a significant voice will be missing from the discussion. Tip – when a design team start to say, 'they won't want to...' or 'they will want to...' then it's a sign that the voice of the 'they' is missing. If one perspective is missing from a design team of 10 people, then imagine missing that proportion from an event of 200 or even 2,000 people.

### 3. Logistics

As soon as you start to plan and think about the event you need to involve your logistics team or the person who will be responsible for logistics. They get to see the day as it is designed, know the conversations to have with venues, understand why certain limitations with venues make them unacceptable. The design team also spend time thinking about how to market, who to invite etc. and for the logistics person to be involved allows them to hear, take part and then action quickly the decisions made.

Further Reading	Author(s)	Publisher	ISBN Number
Future Search - An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Communities and Organisations	Marvin Weisbord & Sandra Janoff	Berrett Koehler	1-881052-12-5
Large Group Interventions - Engaging the Whole System for Rapid Change	Barbara Bunker & Billie T. Alban	Jossey Bass	0-7879-0324-8
Open Space Technology - A User's Guide	Harrison Owen	Abbott	0-961805-3-5
Real Time Strategic Change - How to Involve an Entire Organisation in Fast and Far Reaching Change	Robert W. Jacobs	Berrett Koehler	1-881052-45-1
The Change Handbook	Peggy Holman & Tom Devane	Berrett Koehler	1-57675-058-2

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